

Don't Give Up!

Practical Strategies for Challenging Collaborations

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Lindsey T., third year special education consulting teacher, Pine View Elementary School:

"Never again! On Friday, I talked to Samantha about the problems my students were having with the math homework she assigns. She promised that she would have a few options for us to discuss after the weekend. When I reminded her this morning, she didn't even look guilty about forgetting. Her face was a total blank, and she said, 'Lindsey, you'll have to remind me—did I promise you something?' She didn't even remember our conversation! I've tried so many times, and nothing works. Why do I bother?"

Samantha K., first year teacher, Pine View Elementary School:

"I spent all weekend trying to come up with something for Lindsey, but I couldn't think of anything. I felt more and more frustrated. But when she came up to me today, I couldn't admit that I didn't have any ideas. It was easier to play dumb. How are we going to make this collaboration work?"

The teachers in this situation are not able to admit they are having problems, and they are not alone. People faced with collaboration challenges are often reluctant to be honest about problems because in many schools collaboration is a norm (e.g., Burnett & Peters-Johnson, 2004; Villa & Thousand, 2005). But whereas most special educators are intuitively skilled at working with others, "problematic professional encounters are inevitable barriers that will appear occasionally in the life of every special educator" (Cramer, 2006, p. 6). This article draws on the professional literature in education and in business management (see box "What Does the Literature Say About Teacher Collaboration?"), as well as on the experiences of hundreds of teachers, to offer evidence-based strategies for addressing challenges in teacher collaborations.

How Can I Collaborate With a Teacher Whose Style Is Very Different From Mine?

Situation: *I'm a new consultant teacher, and think I was hired partly*

because I'm very outgoing. This has worked well with Robert; we seem to complement each other, and we get a lot done in the classroom. But Jocelyn, the other teacher with whom I collaborate, is very reserved. I doubt that the two of us are ever going to really see things the same way. I'm afraid that my enthusiasm is putting her off; as a result I become self-conscious. I don't like the passive role I've begun to take within the class, but don't know how to turn things around.

Good news! The recent experience of collaborating teachers (e.g., Mastropieri et al., 2005) and the long history of teams in the business world (e.g., Drucker, 1994) point to two important truths:

1. You can collaborate effectively with people who are quite different from you.
2. No single collaborative approach works for everyone.

Rather than think about the "right" or "wrong" way to collaborate, consider

instead what you can do to make effective collaboration easier. Roger Fisher has helped negotiators all over the world develop a win-win approach in which they find common ground and use it to create an outcome that is acceptable to both parties (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991). Fisher and his colleagues would recommend that you shift your thinking: view adjustments in your approach to collaboration not as compromises you must make in your teaching style but as steps you are willing to take to achieve your overall goal of working well together. Consider, too, that in teaching as in management, many models exist for effective collaboration (Bauwens & Hourcade, 2003; Drucker, 1994; Friend & Cook, 2007). The models and strategies you are using successfully in one class may not work in another, but with time and effort you can find strategies that will work in the new setting. Finding collaborative models that work for each of the settings in which you teach is vitally important. Otherwise, you risk settling into a passive role or serving primarily as a teacher assistant, and fail to make full use of the special educator's professional knowledge and skills—and without doubt, your students will lose out.

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Sometimes what appear to be differences in teaching styles are in fact differences in verbal and nonverbal communication styles. To broaden your repertoire of communication skills and to turn your situation into a learning opportunity, develop a strategic approach to listening. Covey's (1989) recommendation is to learn to "listen with the intent to *understand*. . . . Empathic (from empathy) listening gets inside another person's frame of reference. You look out through it, you see the world the way they see the world, you understand their paradigm, you understand how they feel" (p. 240).

What Does the Literature Say About Teacher Collaboration?

Collaboration is no longer just an ingredient in school life but an essential feature (Burnett & Peters-Johnson, 2004; Villa & Thousand, 2005.) It is central to progressive educational reform efforts, according to Mohr and Dichter (2001), because "authentic learning requires an authentic learning community" (p. 747). It is essential to the professional growth that characterizes responsive schools; as Miller, Ray, Dove, & Kenreich (2000) say, "To be able to share insights and work with other colleagues helps to break the isolation and keep us alive as educators" (p. 146). Caron and McLaughlin (2002) identify the presence of a "collaborative culture" as an indicator of an excellent school while noting that collaborative strategies that prove to be effective vary from classroom to classroom. Research projects examining collaboration in the context of early childhood education (e.g., Pianta, Kraft-Sayre, Rimm-Kaufman, Gercke, & Higgins, 2001), elementary education (e.g., Welch, 2000), and secondary settings (e.g., Bouck, 2005) illustrate the variations that can be found in the extended interactions between general and special educators. Collaboration has the potential to make those interactions productive and satisfying for all involved, to the benefit of the students (Idol, 2006).

As the number of special needs students receiving their education in inclusive settings increases, there will be higher expectations for collaboration among special educators, general educators, related service personnel, and paraprofessionals (Gerlach, 2005). Collaboration will likely soon be a fact of life for all those who work with students with disabilities. According to Fisher, Frey, and Thousand (2003), the ability to collaborate is "fundamental" for special educators; they add, "Successful special educators are masters of collaboration" (p. 46). Fortunately, the skills needed for successful collaboration can be learned (Cramer, 2006; Stivers, Lavoie, Perner, & Kinn, 2003), and studies of collaborating teachers have found that they generally evaluate their collaborative skills positively and regard their relationships with their teaching partners as satisfying (e.g., Idol, 2006; Salend & Johansen, 1997).

However, even intelligent and well-intentioned teachers, diligently trying to work together, at times may find that genuine collaboration eludes them. Stumbling blocks to collaboration are both conceptual and pragmatic; they include such factors as a climate of competition rather than cooperation; a lack of clarity about underlying values and beliefs; and inadequate administrative support, planning time, and opportunities for professional development in collaborative skills (Leonard & Leonard, 2003). Although more experienced teachers are significantly more likely to refer to collaboration as a strategy that helps enhance student outcomes (Stough & Palmer, 2001; Stough, Palmer, & Sharp, 2001), experience alone is insufficient to ensure success (Trent, 1998). Teachers can take actions to strengthen their collaborative relationships (Stivers, in press), and in the process they can also change their ways of thinking about their work, and come to value collaboration (Ripley, 1998) for themselves and their students.

Thus, instead of looking at your situation as indentured servitude with someone you did not choose to partner with, you can use the working relationship as a laboratory for learning to listen.

Co-teachers and collaborating
teachers are not always similar in
personality or temperament.

Putting yourself in charge of a goal you select enables you to give up the feeling that you are adjusting unnecessarily.

Of course you will encounter situations in which differences in teaching or communication styles cannot fully explain your lack of compatibility with another teacher. As Sandi Kolk, assistant superintendent in the Lakeland (NY) Central School District, explains in Stivers (in press), co-teachers and collaborating teachers are not always



similar in personality or temperament. Those working relationships have built-in limitations that can be an advantage: “Your co-teacher may not be a person you’d choose to spend time with outside of school. That’s okay. This is a professional relationship, and it succeeds when both parties behave professionally.”

Although you may presume that little can be accomplished if only one person is invested in making the collaborative relationship more effective, that outcome is not necessarily true. Cramer (2006) documents the amazing progress that can be made by teachers who make a commitment to working with another professional in a different way, even if they must do so alone. She explains, “Each relationship develops its own kind of balance. Visualize it as a teeter-totter. When both people stay in the same positions in relation to each other, there is little likelihood of change. When one moves, both are influenced” (p. 9).

Ideally, the change results in new behaviors; sometimes, though, only changes in attitude result. But even small attitudinal changes can make palpable differences. The example that follows, adapted from teacher reports, is typical:

When I started to work on improving our relationship, I decided to pick a problem I faced with my co-teacher all the time. She loves to complain about the school administration. It makes me very uncomfortable; especially since I think her criticisms are exaggerated and sometimes unfair. But I didn’t want to do or say anything to alienate her, because she really is a good teacher for my students.

As I learned more about collaboration, I realized that I couldn’t control her complaining, but I could control my response to it. I learned to avoid responding to her complaints, and as a result our joint prep period each day is less stressful for me. To an outside observer it would look as if nothing has changed; she still complains every day. The change is that I don’t let it get to me anymore. I just accept it as part of her style, something I’m willing to accommodate in the interest of preserving a relationship that serves my students well. It was important for me to learn that we can work together, even if we are not completely compatible.

Making the changes you can make—even if they are changes only in your outlook—can be empowering. Teachers who can let go of negative self-talk or disappointment in the failures of others may find they have more energy for constructive pursuits.

How Long Does Change Take?

Situation: *I know that all things take time, but it is almost the end of the school year! I still haven’t seen any change in the working relationships I’ve tried to establish with my general education colleagues. Our interactions are cordial, even friendly—but they are not the collaborations I had hoped for.*

First, realize that the process of change is gradual, not sudden. Instead of seeing the process as a light switch, consider it to be more like a dimmer. In a year-long study, Phillips, Sapona, and Lubic (1995) trained, interviewed, and observed six general education teachers and the four special education teachers with whom they co-taught. At the end of the year, the teachers advised, “be prepared to ‘put in time’ getting to know your teaching partner; this phase cannot be rushed. It takes time to learn about each other’s styles and preferences” (p. 269). This measured approach may be challenging for teachers who have two qualities that Bauwens and Hourcade (2003) identify as important for effective collaboration: an inner pressure to achieve results and

a high level of confidence in their own abilities. But Bauwens and Hourcade emphasize two other equally important elements: respect for, and trust in, one’s partners and a tolerance of failure and mistakes while seeking results.

Second, help yourself by thinking about your effort as similar to other change initiatives. Co-teaching is a popular form of teacher collaboration that requires each partner to make changes and accommodations; researchers who have investigated the development of co-teaching relationships (e.g., Gately & Gately, 2001; Phillips et al., 1995) have observed that the changes typically proceed in stages. They note that in the early stages, co-teachers may feel uncertain and perhaps anxious; however, even collaborations that have a slow start can develop into satisfying professional relationships. Bridges (2003) provides a model in which the process of change involves letting go of old ways and dealing with the uncertainty of trying out new behaviors before new routines can be established.

To understand the challenges of change, start by looking at how connected we are to our routines and habits. If you try to change even simple things (such as putting your socks on in reverse order, driving to work via a different route, taking public transportation to a new location), you will see that you have to concentrate on these new approaches. You cannot change even uncomplicated habits such as these without focus and effort. Next consider the challenges faced by your general education colleagues when you ask them to modify complex instructional procedures they have spent years perfecting. Such modifications will require not only skill and willpower but patience and dedication on the part of all involved. Make sure that you are realistic about any initiative you undertake, so that you do not become frustrated.

Strategies for Implementing Change

Instead of “watching the clock” and waiting for other people to change their ways, teach yourself to focus on the aspects of your working relationships

that are under your control. Blanchard, Bowles, Carew, and Parisi-Carew (2000) wrote a popular trade book in which concepts about change are incorporated into a story about a fifth-grade ice hockey team. The difficulties adults and boys in the story have are very relevant to teachers. As team members learn to focus on achieving individual goals to advance their teamwork skills, they stop blaming one another and make progress. You can apply this concept to your collaborative relationships. Instead of trying to get other teachers to understand you, shift your focus to learning more about them. As you begin to understand and value what is important to the other teachers, you will find that you have stopped waiting. To help you manage the change process, and your responses to it, consider using one of these strategies:

- *Establish a personal collaboration resource network.* Cramer (2006) provides suggestions for selecting people whose perspective on your collaborative situation will help you gain new insights. Some may be people who work in your school setting, whereas others may know little about the specifics of your school situation but know you very well. The latter individuals may be able to give you useful feedback about your collaborative strengths and advice about how to build on your prior experiences. This “network” of individuals may not ever meet face to face. Think of them as a virtual group that can help you reconsider your goals and the progress you are making toward achieving them. Use the prompts in Figure 1 to identify individuals who might be invited to participate in your network.

Establish a personal collaboration resource network.

- *Create and participate in collaborative communities.* Walther-Thomas, Korinek, and McLaughlin (1999) go a step further than a network to assist you in developing a deeper

Figure 1. Establishing a Collaboration Resource Network

Directions: Next to each prompt, list as many names as come to mind. Think beyond the people with whom you usually interact at school; consider using e-mail or telephone to communicate with resource people who are not nearby, or who have busy schedules.

<i>A person who works at your school, who could maintain your confidences</i>	_____

<i>A person whom you have known for a long time, who can make you laugh</i>	_____

<i>A person who has a good perspective on things</i>	_____

<i>A person who is an effective problem solver</i>	_____

<i>A person with whom you lost touch, with whom you'd like to reconnect</i>	_____

<i>A professor who had good insights about either course content or about how to assist you in doing your coursework</i>	_____

<i>A friend with whom you talk regularly about work</i>	_____

From all the people you have selected, pick three or four with whom you would be able to communicate a few times during the next few months as you focus on improving your collaborative relationship. Explain what you are trying to accomplish, and incorporate each person's advice into your collaboration efforts.

Adapted from S. F. Cramer, *The Special Educator's Guide to Collaboration*, pp. 154–155, copyright 2006 by Corwin Press. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

understanding of your collaborative relationships. They suggest creating communities that “support ongoing teamwork in many ways, [such as] teacher assistance teams and various types of school-improvement committees” (p. 3). By joining some of the schoolwide initiatives, you may find that your focus has shifted away from what you cannot change to what you can contribute.

Serving as part of a mentoring network for new teachers at your school can be fulfilling. Stivers (in press) suggests that “explaining your beliefs and practices [to new co-teaching pairs] can help you think more critically about the . . . decisions you make.” Mandel (2006) emphasizes the importance of help-

ing new teachers: “New teachers aren't thinking about raising scores on the standardized test in May; they are more concerned about how to get through fifth period tomorrow. First year teachers have one basic goal—survival” (p. 66). Working with first-year teachers provides an invaluable service that also can help you realize how far you have come as a teacher, while strengthening your connection to your school community.

- *Keep track of your progress so that you do not become discouraged.* Use any method that works for you to help you see how things are shifting. It is easy to miss some of the changes you are making.



- *Objective data.* In monitoring objective data (e.g., number of interactions over the course of a week or the proportion of substantive interactions to superficial exchanges), you may find that more is happening than you thought. You can also look for patterns that can help you focus your efforts. For example, does face-to-face interaction work better than e-mail? Is before school better than after?
- *Subjective data.* If you can develop criteria for subjective measures, you can give yourself credit for the subtle changes you are making in your behavior. Consider, for example, rating your level of confidence during planned discussions, or awarding “quality points” for initiating spontaneous interactions or forgiving yourself and others for minor mistakes.

Becoming a teacher who can effectively collaborate requires that you keep track of what you are doing that is effective, as well as what you need to modify. Learning how to judge your progress accurately is a valuable skill and one that can help you empathize with your students.

How Can I Talk to My Colleagues About New Ideas for Teaching?

***Situation:** I’ve been a special education consulting teacher at the same school for several years. I’ve got good working relationships with several teachers, and my students are learning. Yet I know things*

could be better. Whenever I bring up a new idea from a workshop or article, I get no response. It seems as if I can talk to my colleagues about anything except changing the way we do things.

It may help to take a step back to see your collaborative relationship within the broader context of your school and district. Your concerns are probably not unique to your own collaborative relationships. You may have more success if you find ways to incorporate your ideas into ongoing professional development activities within your school, district, or professional organization. Here are some ways to get started:

- The next time your school needs to send a teacher to a mandatory workshop, such as training for scoring standardized tests, volunteer to be the one to attend and report back to others about what you have learned. This expertise gives you legitimacy for sharing ideas.
- Delve into the professional literature of your general education colleagues. As Mason, Thormann, O’Connell, and Behrmann (2004) recommend, “scan their [W]eb sites, read some of their association reports, and keep track of articles that are published in at least some of their journals” (p. 227). You are likely to find points of intersection between your concerns and theirs; if not, the discovery process in itself could give you things to discuss.
- Attend a professional development workshop with one of your general education colleagues, as Stivers (in press) advises. Together, you may find ways to incorporate what you have heard at the workshop into activities at your school.
- Join the professional development or superintendent’s day committee in your school or district. Through the use of needs assessments and interest surveys, you can find topics of interest to the teachers with whom you work. Once plans are under way for the next professional development day, establish a Web site (by working with the technology-proficient people in your district) and

build excitement about the event by posting information about speakers and providing links to online reference materials that are relevant to both general and special educators. As a follow-up to the professional development event, establish a discussion board so that interested teachers and other professionals can discuss how they are using the workshop content. Those individuals who are interested in pursuing use of the content could become a resource group throughout the school year.

Do not stop being intrigued with the possibilities of integrating relevant content into conversations and events in your school. Make sure that your sharing is timely and well connected to interests of others in your school.

Collaborative relationships can
be a rich source of professional
and personal growth.

Final Thoughts

Collaborative relationships can be a rich source of professional and personal growth, well worth the investment of time and effort that may be needed to nurture them. As with all human relationships, things will not always go smoothly. When difficulties arise, teachers can examine their assumptions and practices, and make adjustments that enable progress to take place. There are no quick fixes; addressing challenges in collaborative relationships takes reflection, energy, and persistence. However, even in imperfect situations, teachers who persevere can find new, gratifying, and mutually satisfying ways to work with others.

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